DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 307 195 SO 019 898

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TITLE Pushing against the Margins: A Commentary and Response to "Patterns of Social Fragmentation and Cohesion: The Social Context of 21st Century Education for Citizenship by David Watts, Donald Matlock, and Alvin Short."
PUB DATE Oct 88
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the National Conference on the Future of Civic Education (Washington, DC, October 5-7, 1988). For related documents, see ED 302 474, SO 019 887, and SO 019 895-897.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; *Citizenship Education; *Civics; Community; Community Involvement; *Curriculum Enrichment; Demography; Educational Objectives; Grade 8; Grade 9; Junior High Schools; *Relevance (Education); *Sociology; Student Needs

ABSTRACT

The inclusion of more sociology related materials in the 8th and 9th grade civics curriculum can push the margins of civics education to a more broadly conceived notion of citizenry and make civics and sociology more relevant to students' lives. The goal should be to help students understand society, not the discipline of sociology. Sociology instruction can channel the developmental characteristics of adolescents (insecurity, rebelliousness) and help connect these personal biographies to larger social forces. David Watts and his colleagues contribute to using sociology to expand the parameters of the traditional civics course by emphasizing the following themes: (1) the centrality of community; (2) the mutual influence of the individual with the group; (3) the importance of demographic information; (4) the pluralism of family forms; (5) the complementary nature of sociological research in citizen development; (6) the need for a core culture; (7) the need for repair of social ecology; (8) the desirability of national service; and (9) the growth and importance of mediating structures. In addition, it should be realized that: (1) the issues of the 21st century will, at their foundation, be people issues, not technological ones; (2) the key challenge to civility is the management of diversity; (3) the information overload of the future will require social data evaluation skills; and (4) sociology can help students respect social knowledge, yet know its limits. Four references are given, and an appendix includes a list of 10 learning objectives that should be reached upon completion of an eighth grade civics course. (PPB)

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PUSHING AGAINST THE MARGINS

A COMMENTARY AND RESPONSE TO "Patterns of Social Fragmentation and Cohesion: The Social Context of 21st Century Education for Citizenship" by David Watts, Donald Matlock, and Alvin Short

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SO 019 898

prepared for the NAtional Conference on the Future of Civic Education, entitled "Citizenship for the 21st Century", Washington, DC; October 5-7, 1988

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"Pushing Against the Margins"

I am excited about the premise of this conference, to extend civics education and presumably to improve it. With bold partisanship, I assert that sociology can help reach that goal. Sociology per se is relatively absent from civics education in the secondary schools, at best appearing as an elective for high school seniors. Our discipline must work in partnership with educators to see what contributions are most effective for the 8th/9th grade civics curriculum. Once those goals are set, teachers need to be better trained in sociology (as the Watts et. al. paper argues) and curriculum materials need to be developed.

At the outset I admit to having a bone to pick with Diane Ravitch's well publcized report for the National Endowment for the Humanities. Finding after finding points to students woefully ignorant of our nation's history and world geography. Her damning finger points to the civic curriculum, which she disparagingly describes as "tot sociology." I share her concerns but reject her conclusion. We can continue the debate as I argue for "teen sociology."

My pitch here is to include more, not less, sociological material in the 8th/9th grade civics curriculum, to be sure because in doing so:

(1) we push the margins of civics education to a better place - a notion of the citizenry more broadly conceived than relationships with formal government;

(2) we identify powerful ideas in sociology that empower students, and therefore are interesting to them;

(3) we match the developmental needs of that age group with challenging intellectual material.

Civics broadly conceived should refer to being a good citizen in all the social groups in which we participate. We all conduct our lives on the assumption that most of the time, most people will stop at red lights - even when an agent of the government (i.e., police) is not around to catch offenders. We have internalized the right thing to do, "right" in the sense of living respectfully (and safely) with other people.

Other rules of social conduct aren't so clear and there is not as much consensus. Can people park RVs in front of their own homes in rule-bound surburban developments? Should public schools observe holidays of one or more religious or ethnic traditions? Should warning labels appear on records with a rating system for the "offensiveness" of the lyrics? Many of these questions common to everyday life have a partial solution in law, but operate primarily in the realm of community consensus (or disensus). Our society is becoming more litiginous - what countervailing means can we all employ to work out differences and maximize the number of "win-win" solutions?

Life within groups is where it's at - for 8th graders and for their teachers. We operate in families, in churches, communities, voluntary organizations, etc. We gain personal identity and support from these groups, as well as the means to make things happen. We need to help teenagers realize that a good citizen is someone who not only knows about government, but understand general principles of group dynamics. (I will identify some of the tangible pedagogical implications later in the paper).

I cling to the hope that students are more motivated to learn about society than perhaps about algebraic equestions. High school or college students come to sociology/social studies with a motivation to "understand people." If the teachers (and sociology discipline) can control our impulses to shout them down with claims that "sociology is a science" not a route to therapy, we can capture this flicker of motivation and ride with it. Our goal is to help 8th graders understand society, not the discpline of sociology. This goal is reasonable, given all the other objectives within the civics curriculum and the limited teacher training in the field.

Eighth and ninth graders come to civics class at a time of life full of ambivalence, insecurity, and rebelliousness. Sociology can channel - not supress - those developmental characteristics. At this age students can easily fall to one of two extremes: hopeless naivete and gullibleness, or, acute cynicism. Neither posture furthers civic responsibility. Sociologists know a lot about how people live and act in groups, and about the large social forces that shape but do not

determine their life chances. And we know about how social change can come about. These insights - the connection of personal biographies to larger social forces - is exciting and empowering for students at this age.

Let me highlight some of the contributions this paper makes to pushing the margins of the traditional civics course:

1. the centrality of community (p.3) - community is a subjective notion, transcending geographic boundaries, and can mean a racial or religious identity, a regional, local, or neighborhood affiliation. This subjective sense becomes and important reference group for the developing individual. At age 14, the idea (or the appeal) of being a voter in a national Presidential election seems remote at best. A focus on the students' own community(ies) may be more illuminating.

2. the mutual influence of the individual with the group - this basic theme of sociology can be elaborated with examples of all kinds of groups: the subcultures within a school (e.g., jocks, geeks, pnks, etc.), school teams, "east side" and "west side" of town, or family groups (of all kinds).

3. the importance of demographic information - the 21st century will usher in a United States that is more non-white than white, with a significantly older population, and regional redistribution of what will forever be a primarily urban-based population. How does one's own life experience get shaped by the birth cohort. (For and excellent exposition of this idea, see Kennedy, Life Choices.) The realization that interdependence is a difficult idea for 14 year olds to grasp makes it all the more urgent to persuasively convey to them. At a life stage where "me and my choices" are central, it is imperative to set a context that identifies what impact those choices will have, and what will affect (and may already have done so) the choices.

4. the pluralism of family forms (p.19) - Most households do not conform to the Ozzie and Harriet mold. Most of us will experience several family forms throughout our lives and must, as the authors point out, look ahead to likely family patterns. No one marries with the expectation of getting divorced. Everyone should understand the prevalence, consequences, and correlates of divorce, however.

5. sociologists can help citizens dvelop "self discipline, mutuality, civility" (p.21) - the authors need to give greater exposition to Etzioni's three goals. Nonetheless, sociological information can complement that of history (understanding the context the past provides) and political science (understanding law and responsibility) by looking at methods of social control and problem solving.

6. the need for a core culture (p.23) - social cohesion is built on a core culture, but this notion is hard to reconcile in light of an increasingly heterogeneous population. The key is to have a pedagogy that critically examines many diverse elements of our culture relating to the actions of government and citizens. Teachers must push against the margins of premature conclusions, much less censorship. Read books on slavery, by slaves and slaveholders, to understand our nation's history. Don't reach closure on Vietnam. Sociology is a question-raising discipline

7. the social ecology needs repair (p.25) - students (and adults) can't cope with the awesome responsibility for all the problems of an interdependent world. But they can identify social problems in their immediate community and realize that individual's private problems are connected to large social issues. This insight - repeated and reinforced - may lead to ideas, actions, and solutions that are more tolerant, less blaming of the victim , and more long lasting.

8. the desirability of national service (p.32) - Etzioni and others identify the usefulness of national service for both the individual student and the community. The general idea can be as full blown as a year of obligatory service, or more humble as some class projects within a local community. Such experiences mean that students are learning both content and values by actively participating in making the world better for others.

9. the growth and importance of mediating structures (p. 41) - Civic education needs to encourage pluralism as students work through their own mediating structures (groups of all sorts) to become active in their community.

To the important insights of Watts et. al. let me add four other ways in which I think sociology can push the margins of civic education for the better.

1. The issues of the 21st century are people issues, not only technological ones. The Challenger tragedy had as much to do with human chains of command as it did with O-rings. Technology will always precede our ability to know how to manage it and today's eighth graders must make the decisions on surrogate parenting, genetic testing, organ transplants, and so on.

2. The key challenge to civility is the management of diversity. Skills of conflict resolution/mediation and tolerance are in short supply. Education is thought to broaden a person and increase tolerance. That goal must be a carefully operationalized classroom objective.

3. Life in the 21st century will include information overload. Students need to be taught how to critically assess the quality of information, find needed information, make "fast and focused" (not "quick and dirty") decisions, and certainly not cop out. Sociology and other social sciences need to help students learn to evaluate data, collect data, and separate out value statements from scientific evidence.

4. Sociology can help students transcend the limitations of common sense. As Descartes put it, "common sense is not so common." Nonetheless, students need to separate their values/preferences/assumptions from empirical evidence. It is allright to hold an opinion for or against the death penalty. It is inaccurate to allege that the death penalty is a deterrent to crime. Civics education should include the goal of respecting knowledge and knowing its limits.

I have appended a list of objectives to serve as a sample of what Watts et. al. and my own suggestions might look like in a curriculum. Pedagogically, we must model the behavior we seek from students. That includes data gathering, simulations, social observation, critically looking at the assumptions from which people operate. The 21st century brings life in an interdependent, heterogeneous world community. Sociology can help push the margins of intellectual blinders away, as the geographic

boundaries stretch for today's students.

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for an example of a concept-driven approach to education, with application exercises, see William C. Levin, Sociological Ideas (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1984).

for an example of common sense assumptions that are not supported by social science evidence, see Ian Robertson, Sociology (New York: Worth Publishing, 1987).

APPENDIX

Some Learning Objectives that Might be Used in Civics Education

After completing this eighth grade civics course, students should be able to:

1.Discuss the social implications of inequality based on a position within a class; and how stratification systems are maintained.

2.Connect your birth cohort to opportunities and limitations to your life chances.

3. Define ethnocentrism and discuss its implications for a culture.

4. Identify sources of social control and how they work.

5. Explain the significance of living in a corporate economy and interacting with bureaucracies.

6. Link events in your personal biography to larger social issues.

7. Indicate how subcultures and countercultures related to the dominant culture.

8. Outline conditions for useful social scientific evidence.

9. Present examples of the significance of demographic shifts in some other part of the world on your community.

10. Describe your roles and the groups to which you belong and how these relationships link you to the larger society.